

MEDICAL NEWS

Report urges better NHS audit

An official report making several recommendations for improving audit of how the National Health Service uses its resources was published on 11 August. The report, prepared by a combined Department of Health and Social Services and NHS working party chaired by Mr Patrick Salmon, proposes that all health authorities should produce audit plans that aim to achieve a minimum acceptable level of audit in all key areas of financial responsibility. Suggesting that authorities, especially smaller ones, should join together in consortiums to provide audit cover, the report says that until they gain sufficient skills in computer audit the DHSS should provide specialist support. Other proposals for strengthening audit procedures are also put forward for consideration.

In his introduction to the report Mr Salmon says that the working party believed that "the management of the funds is just as critical as the uses to which the funds are put," and that it was crucial for there to be "a central point within the Department to determine the problems, to collect information, to analyse the facts and to make recommendations." The recommendation will, says the DHSS, be considered by ministers in the light of the advice of the management inquiry team, led by Mr Roy Griffiths, deputy chairman of Sainsburys, now studying the use of management of NHS resources. The report is being sent to health authorities for consultation. Copies of the *Report of the DHSS/NHS Audit Working Group* are obtainable by post and payment in advance from DHSS (leaflets), PO Box 21, Stanmore, Middlesex HA7 1AY, price £3.80.

Private medicine's growth continues

Over four million people are now covered by private health schemes in the United Kingdom, according to a new report on the health industry published this month. In the latest edition of *The Health Report* (published by Euromonitor, 18 Doughty Street, London WC1, price £160) it is argued that the growth in private health care will not endanger the structure of the National Health Service. The report states that around 140 private hospitals are now operating in the UK with another 12 under construction, giving, along with pay beds in NHS hospitals, about 40 000 private beds. The private hospitals had a turnover of £330m in 1982; the NHS had a turnover of £14 900m in the same year. Most payments for private health care continue to come from group health schemes such as British United Provident Association (BUPA), Private Patients Plan, and Western Provident Association, which provide 95% of all health insurance, with BUPA holding around 75%. In 1982, 4.2 million people were covered by health schemes compared with 2.4 million in 1978, and roughly 50% of subscriptions are paid by employees.

Gross output from the pharmaceutical industry totalled £2768m in 1982, with sales to the NHS accounting for over 50% at £1400m—a twofold increase since 1978. Exports accounted for £922m and home medicines (trade prices) for £367m. The Euromonitor report estimates sales of "over

the counter" remedies to be worth around £440m in 1982, a fall in real terms over previous years.

New edition of guide to professional conduct and discipline

A new edition of the pamphlet *Professional Conduct and Discipline: Fitness to Practise*, has recently been published. The General Medical Council has approved of the substantial changes in the description of professional misconduct, and the section on "professional confidence" has been extensively revised.

Alternative therapy: BMA working party

The British Medical Association is to inquire into alternative therapy. A working party of the association's board of science and education, chaired by Professor J P Payne, research professor of anaesthesia at the Royal College of Surgeons of England, has asked for information from doctors and lay therapists using alternative therapies. In a press statement on 16 August the BMA explained that the working party wants to know about different therapies being used—for example, acupuncture, biofeedback, faith healing, and herbalism—and about whether such treatments are being used alone or with more orthodox methods of medicine. Its terms of reference are "to consider the feasibility, and possible methods, of assessing the value of alternative therapies, whether used alone or to complement other treatments." Commenting on the inquiry, Professor Payne said, "Our minds are open. Much success is being claimed for

alternative therapy so we believe the time is right to gather information." Those wishing to supply information should write to the head of the BMA's professional division, BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1, by 30 September. The *BMJ* published a leading article, "Alternative medicine," on 30 July (p 307).

Information please

From 1 September Dr R A C Hughes and Dr J B Winer will be undertaking a case controlled study on the clinical, electrophysiological, and immunological aspects of patients with the Guillain-Barré syndrome. They would be most grateful for information about patients presenting with acute idiopathic neuropathy in greater London and south east Kent. The study has been funded by the Multiple Sclerosis Society, and they hope to collect 100 cases over the next two years. Notifications should be made to Dr J B Winer, department of neurology, Guy's Hospital (tel 01-407 7600 ext 2058).

People in the news

Brigadier D E Worsley has been appointed honorary physician to the Queen.

Brigadier A J Shaw has been appointed honorary physician to the Queen.

Correction

We regret that the name of the first holder of the British Heart Foundation chair of cardiac surgery at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School was given as Mr Kenneth Holder (30 July, p 366). This should have read Mr Kenneth Taylor.

COMING EVENTS

"Intermedical foot health"—Symposium, 5 October, Birmingham. Details from Mr R Lapham, 25 Link Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham (with sac) or see the post-graduate secretary of Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Miss J D H Talbot.

North Staffs MIND—Conference "The homeless mind: housing and mental health," 14 October, Stoke on Trent. Details from North Staffs MIND, 44 Church Street, Stoke on Trent ST4 1BL. (Tel 0782 46363.)

"Incontinence: investigation and management"—Symposium, 28 October, Glasgow. Details from Mr Eric Glen FRCS, Walton Urological Teaching and Research Centre, Southern General Hospital, Glasgow G51 4TF.

National Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital—21st annual conference "In the best interests of the child," 1 November, London. Details from the conference secretary of the association, 7 Exton Street, London SE1 8UE. Closing date for registration 10 October.

Kent Postgraduate Medical Centre at Canterbury—Details of the annual Pfizer lecture, 11 November, and symposium "Psychiatric problems in women," 12 November, Canterbury, are available from the post-graduate administrator of the centre, Mrs Allen, Kent and Canterbury Hospital, Canterbury CT1 3NG, tel 0227 66877 ext 4367, or Dr M F Hussain, St Augustine's Hospital, Chartham, Canterbury, tel Chartham 382.

"Medical diagnostic imaging"—Annual spring seminars 11-16 May, Amsterdam, and 16-20 May 1984, London. Details from the secretary of the seminars, West Park Medical Office Building, 22135 Roscoe Boulevard, Suite 104, Canoga Park, California 91304, USA.

"Opioid peptides in periphery"—Symposium sponsored by the National Research Council Italy, and

the Italian Societies of Endocrinology, Andrology, and Gastroenterology, 23-25 May 1984, Rome. Details from the organising secretariat, APE, Via Giorgio Vassari 4, 00196 Rome, Italy. Closing date for submission of lectures 30 November.

CONSULTANT APPOINTMENTS

NORTHERN RHA—Dr K W Nightingale, Dr J J H Sherriff, Dr A Redpath (anaesthetics); Dr K A Howells, Dr W M Hazeldine, Dr I J Runcie, Dr C H E S Morgan (radiology); Dr J M R Damas Mora (mental illness); Mr V A C Reece (accident and emergency); Dr Angharad E Davies (obstetrics and gynaecology); Dr H A W O'Brien, Dr P W Condie, Dr T Bird (haematology); Mr B S Avery (oral surgery); Dr P M Earnshaw (geriatric and general medicine); Dr B Hazarika (geriatric medicine); Dr P C Soundararajan, Dr W Brough (mental handicap); Dr P J Whewell (psychotherapy); Mr R Baker, Mr J E C Shand (general surgery); Dr J Callaghan, Dr R G Ghazala (histopathology); Dr C D Holland (rheumatology and rehabilitation).

SOUTHAMPTON AND SOUTH WEST HAMPSHIRE HEALTH AUTHORITY—Dr D O'Leary (child and adolescent psychiatry).

SALFORD HEALTH AUTHORITY—Dr Susan M Bailey (psychiatrist for regional adolescent secure unit).

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One Man's Burden

Mr Robert Robinson (whom God preserve) saw a pair of stout knickerbockers in a shop in Oxford. The ticket pinned to them said that they were guaranteed by the Country Gentleman's Association or some such name, and underneath that it said "ferret proof." Mr Robinson wondered how the point was established and speculated thus:

"I concluded that it must be carried out under conditions of scientific rigour and strict control at ferret proofing grounds, probably just south of Bicester. A handpicked member of *Burke's Landed Gentry* is buttoned into the knickerbockers—'Whenever you're ready, m'lord.'—'Very well, Thomas, let the little beggars out.' And a sackful of ferrets tumble over one another, giving their characteristic high mewing cry—a sure sign that they have sighted a pair of knickerbockers—and once more, hope undiminished by experience, they attempt for the umpteenth time the impossible penetration, and for the umpteenth time the buckles frustrate them. 'I think that puts it beyond dispute, eh, Thomas?' And the coveted certificate is (like those seals of efficiency handed out to Swiss watches) reluctantly conceded."

* * *

I first heard that fantasy unfurl in a basement studio in Broadcasting House during Radio 4's *Stop the Week* and recently when I read it set in sharp black print it evoked the same pleasure as the sight of a long unseen friend approaching along a lonely road. I repeat it now because I feel the need for a get away from medicine week and the story can be found in a book that I recommend if you too are off on an escapist holiday or an early autumnal awayday.

Some may reckon that it is bad form to recommend books written by friends but if a book manages to leap the hurdle of friendship it clearly has some quality. So this week, in the spirit of Winston Churchill when he said of Duncan Sandys in the House of Commons "On this occasion I agree with the Right Honourable Gentleman despite the fact he is my son in law," I shamelessly commend books not by one friend but two.

The description of the ferret test comes from Robert Robinson's *The Dog Chairman*, which contains other evocations of Saturday nights spent in relentless pursuit of the elusive. It includes, for instance, the sentences from which grew our subversive campaign against the solid Volvo, the car whose sidelights never sleep. 'Twas Robinson who started it by suggesting that "the lights, of course, don't radiate actual light; they radiate self satisfaction, as though the driver is taking special care about some mysterious hazard—possibly reindeer or elk—that the rest of us are too thoughtless to bother about."

The book,¹ however, is not just a collection of Saturday night mockery—a form of mockery that only after mocking self presumes to look for more distant targets. Readers will find affectionate portraits of Robinson's tutor at Oxford, Nevill Coghill, and of his friend J B Priestley. There are interviews with Nabokov, Solzenitsyn, and Jorg Luis Borges, a description of Sir Ralph Richardson in rehearsal, and en-

counters with David Hockney and other personages of the calibre you'd expect to share their thoughts with a man once invited to chair a discussion group of ventriloquised dogs. Nigel, the television commercial producer, was discomfited when Robinson refused but, by then, had given him a title for his book. Every piece in it is presented in the effortless style—oh what a deception that is—and the delight in the precision of our language that keep the tradition of the essay alive within these islands.

I read it on an aeroplane and its episodic construction is ideally suited to a journey regularly interrupted by food, by drink, by immigration forms, and by irrelevant inquiries over the Tannoy about people who have lost their tickets, their luggage, or their children. On the flight back I escaped tedium thanks to another friend, who evoked the spirit not of Saturday night but of Monday lunchtime.

* * *

Every Monday, if I'm in London, I lunch with a group of friends which includes the Hungarian humorist George Mikes, for whom long before I met him, I harboured an ungrudging admiration for his skill at the perilous craft of laughter making. In a stream of books since *How to be an Alien* he has cultivated a style in which he elides a stream of entertaining anecdotes with some mischievous personal philosophy that at first glance seems quirky but, as he develops it, grows to have the maddening unassailable logic of Rubik's cube.

His latest instruction manual² tells us not just how to be poor but why. He writes, of course, of "middle class poverty"—not the cruel variety that reigns in inner cities—and his standards of unostentatious comfort seem to have been set by his stepfather, who was a hardworking physician in Budapest. George now commends any doctor whose life is adequately comfortable to curb acquisitive ambition. Notions of riches beyond the need of comfort are ephemeral because we have no scale with which to measure them. In his support he quotes Charles Clore, who when he heard that the Chinese communists had annexed the personal fortune of one of the Rothschilds exclaimed in horror: "One minute he had £40 million, the next it had all gone. And that at a time when 40 million was still money."

All in all it's a delightful book, dedicated to "my friend and publisher, André Deutsch, without whose kind help I could not have managed to remain poor," and guaranteed to exorcise the tedium from the dreariest of journeys. Not only does it amuse but I suspect that many who are naturally non-rich will feel more content with their lot after reading the serene advice of a man who claims he has spent his life running away from money, on the whole successfully. Unbelievable? Read it and judge for yourself.

¹ Robinson R. *The dog chairman*. London: Allen Lane, 1982.

² Mikes G. *How to be poor*. London: André Deutsch, 1983

MICHAEL O'DONNELL